

Numbers 23 - Thursday, December 30th, 2010

- From Numbers chapter 22 through 25 we have the most fascinating story of Balaam and Balak attempting to curse the Israelites.
- We completed chapter 22, and tonight will complete chapter 23 as we see how it is that man proposes, but ultimately God disposes.

23:1 Then Balaam said to Balak, "Build seven altars for me here, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams." 2 And Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered a bull and a ram on each altar. 3 Then Balaam said to Balak, "Stand by your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you." So he went to a desolate height.

- We begin with Balaam having Balak build seven altars, and prepare seven sacrifices to present as a burnt offering to the Lord.
- It's interesting to note that the purpose in doing this is that it's for the Lord to both meet with him and speak to and through him.

4 And God met Balaam, and he said to Him, "I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered on each altar a bull and a ram." 5 Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak."

- Now, we're about to see this play out in that the Lord will meet Balaam, and just as He said to him, he will only speak what God allows.

6 So he returned to him, and there he was, standing by his burnt offering, he and all the princes of Moab.

- Everything is ready and boy are they in for a big surprise. Balak is prepared to pay Balaam big bucks, but it's going to be a big bummer.

7 And he took up his oracle and said: "Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, From the mountains of the east. 'Come, curse Jacob for me, And come, denounce Israel!' 8 "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced? 9 For from the top of the rocks I see him, And from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, Not reckoning itself among the nations. 10 "Who can count the dust of Jacob, Or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, And let my end be like his!"

- Well, here we go. As soon as Balaam opens up his mouth to speak, it's an oracle from the Lord in how the Lord has not cursed them.
- It is for this reason that no matter how they try, if God has blessed Israel, then no man can curse Israel. God has already blessed them.
- One can't help but wonder what's going through Balak's mind as he hears, what he is expecting as a curse, coming out as a blessing.

11 Then Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully!"

- Balak, for what would be deemed as obvious reasons, is livid with this Balaam in that he actually accuses him of being deceptive.

12 So he answered and said, "Must I not take heed to speak what the LORD has put in my mouth?"

- Balaam's response is sort of telling in that he seems to be trying to come clean by telling Balak the truth about what he has to speak.

13 Then Balak said to him, "Please come with me to another place from which you may see them; you shall see only the outer part of them, and shall not see them all; curse them for me from there.

- Balak thinks taking Balaam to another location, where he's limited in the numbers of Israelites he can see, will make the difference.

14 So he brought him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.

- Notice that, not only are they in a higher location, but, they're building seven altars and offering seven bulls and rams once again.
- What is up with these seven altars and sacrifices? Is it superstitious in thinking that, with lucky number seven they'll hit the jackpot?
- Adam Clarke in his commentary, brings up an interesting thought which I believe has some merit as to why it is that they do this, again.

Some think that these seven altars were built to the seven planets: ... as seven was a number of perfection. Balaam chose it on this occasion, because he intended to offer a grand sacrifice, and to offer a bullock and a ram upon each of the altars; the whole to be made a burnt-offering at the same time. And as he intended to offer seven bullocks and seven rams at the same time, it could not be conveniently done on one altar, therefore he ordered seven to be built.

Adam Clarke

15 And he said to Balak, "Stand here by your burnt offering while I meet the LORD over there." 16 Then the LORD met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, "Go back to Balak, and thus you shall speak." 17 So he came to him, and there he was, standing by his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab were with him. And Balak said to him, "What has the LORD spoken?"

- Notice how that this time, Balak asks Balaam what it is that the Lord has given him to speak. Does he actually think his plan worked?
- I find it rather amusing that people who don't know the Lord, think that they can actually know the mind of the Lord, and even change it.
- Well, what we're about to see is that the Lord is not a man that He should change, because as He has said, so will He do.

18 Then he took up his oracle and said: "Rise up, Balak, and hear! Listen to me, son of Zippor! 19 "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? 20 Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.

- It's almost as if the Lord is saying; "you, as man, can't know or change the mind of the Lord, but I as the Lord can read the mind of man.

"The immutability of the divine counsel is the safety of the saints. No entreaties of our foes can move the heart of God away from us; we are His chosen, and we shall be so evermore. Every promise is yea and amen in Christ Jesus, and not one single word of the Lord shall ever fall to the ground. Men shift like quicksand, but the Lord is firm as a rock."

Charles Spurgeon

21 "He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, Nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The LORD his God is with him, And the shout of a King is among them. 22 God brings them out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox. 23 "For there is no sorcery against Jacob, Nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob And of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done!' 24 Look, a people rises like a lioness, And lifts itself up like a lion; It shall not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of the slain."

- As I was studying this particular passage in preparing to teach it, something struck me about this. I didn't catch it the first time I taught it.
- It's possible that when Balaam speaks about Israel not having any wickedness or iniquity, that if they did, then a curse would come.
- In other words, this may have been the clue as to how they would ultimately bring a curse down upon them, with iniquity found in them.

"Not such iniquity as to lead Him to put them away. Balaam knew that nothing but sin could separate God from Israel, and he saw that by some means or other the Lord had not seen iniquity in His people. We know, what he did not, that a Mediator came between, otherwise Israel's sins had long before been her destruction. No doubt compared with the Moabites and especially the filthy Canaanites, the people in the wilderness were remarkably pure to Balaam's judgment; but it would have fared very ill with them if this had been their only righteousness."

Charles Spurgeon

25 Then Balak said to Balaam, "Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all!"

- This is sort of humorous. It's like Balak is telling Balaam to just stop talking, don't even curse them at all or even try to bless them at all.

26 So Balaam answered and said to Balak, "Did I not tell you, saying, 'All that the LORD speaks, that I must do'?"

- Balaam's response is equally as humorous. He basically tells Balaam; "I told you so." Everything he speaks has to come from the Lord.

27 Then Balak said to Balaam, "Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there." 28 So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, that overlooks the wasteland. 29 Then Balaam said to Balak, "Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams." 30 And Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on every altar.

- Chapter 23 ends where it really shouldn't, because the next chapter has the third blessing that Balaam pronounces on the Israelites.
- Here we have the preparations as Balak seemingly changes his mind and sort of begs Balaam to try again in yet another location.
- It's germane to our understanding that Balak keeps taking Balaam to not only different locations, but higher elevations.

- I want to round a corner and talk about something that's been on my heart as of late, and we just saw it in this chapter here in Numbers.

- It's the matter of superstition, luck, and the like. I want to quote something from Spurgeon again with the hopes it will fill in some blanks.

"No plan of men or devils can succeed against the elect of God. We have no cause to fear evil omens, in fact, it would be sinful to do so. It is wicked to feel the superstitious fear of the old heathen. No magical arts, Satanic devices, or malicious plotting can really injure the beloved of the Lord. ... God's work shall baffle man's and excite wonder when human malice is forgotten."

Charles Spurgeon

- Lastly, let me bring this in for a landing with some lessons that we would do well to learn from this most interesting chapter:

1. There is a spiritual warfare taking place in the unseen realm. It's interesting to note that the Israelites have no idea about any of this.

2. No one can curse whom God has blessed. This is Genesis 12:2-3 reiterated in verse 8 of this chapter, and the first of four blessings.

- In other words, all four of these oracles are a reaffirming of a prior promise from God to bless the Children of Israel.

- The second one is found in verse 10, where Balaam says; "Who can count the dust of Jacob, Or number one-fourth of Israel?"

Genesis 13:16 NKJV And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, *then* your descendants also could be numbered.

3. As I mentioned at the beginning of our study, sometimes God disposes of that which man proposes, and that's what we see here.

4. Often times we wrongly conclude that numbers matter. We saw this when Balak takes Balaam to a place where he see's less of them.

"The king thought that the number, bounty, and order of Israel might have influenced the prophet, and therefore, he would only let him see a part of them. The trick was in vain. God does not love His people because of their number. If there were but two or three He would be quite as sure to bless them."

Charles Spurgeon

5. We can't know nor change the mind of God. This is why both Balak and Balaam offered seven sacrifices on seven altars three times.

1Corinthians 2:16 NKJV For "WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD THAT HE MAY INSTRUCT HIM?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Romans 11:34-35 NKJV (35) "FOR WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD? OR WHO HAS BECOME HIS COUNSELOR?"
(35) "OR WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM AND IT SHALL BE REPAYED TO HIM?"

6. Just because I make costly sacrifices doesn't mean that I will be blessed because of it. Again, this is why they keep offering sacrifices.
- If you do the math, 7 times 3 sacrifices of both bulls and rams comes to a total of 42, plus Balaam's pay. That's a lot of money.

7. The seventh and final one we'll look at tonight is how it is that a pure life is a blessed life. Conversely, a wicked life is a cursed life.
- While we'll see this in graphic detail in our subsequent studies of Balak and Balaam, suffice it to say that they couldn't curse Israel.
- We're told that the reason they couldn't was because there was no iniquity or wickedness found in the Israelites.